

Why the politicians have united to take down the Confederate flag

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30 June 2015

The campaign to remove Confederate flags and other symbols of slavery from public places, following the murder of nine African Americans by a white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina two weeks ago, has accelerated.

Since South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, a Republican, called June 22 for the removal of the “stars and bars” from the Statehouse grounds in Columbia, state politicians and members of Congress of both parties from across the South have followed with demands that flags and other emblems of the Confederacy be taken down. This push has expanded to include statues of Civil War figures such as Confederate States of America President Jefferson Davis and General Robert E. Lee. Democrats and Republicans in a number of states have called for a ban on Confederate emblems on specialty license plates.

This sudden rush to take down symbols of racism and slavery that the American political establishment has kept in place for decades is a defensive response to an outpouring of public horror over the Charleston killings and popular hostility to racism. This powerful reaction has taken the political establishment and both parties by surprise, forcing them to reckon with vast changes in popular consciousness of a broadly democratic character, particularly in the South.

They fear this development, particularly as it follows protests across the country against police killings and other signs of social discontent. By removing symbols of slavery and racism, they are seeking to preempt the development of a broader, deeper and more politically conscious movement of the working class.

US Representative Mark Sanford, a former governor of South Carolina, gave an indication of the outpouring of public anger against symbols of the Confederacy, saying last week that legislators’ phones, including his, “had just been blowing up” from constituents demanding that the flag be taken down. “I’ve never seen South Carolina politics move this quickly,” he said.

A Rasmussen poll published June 24 reported that only 21 percent of likely US voters want the Confederate flag to keep flying at the South Carolina capitol, compared with 60 percent who want to see it removed.

These are indications of a vast change in popular consciousness in the United States, in contradiction to the insistence of “left” and liberal purveyors of racial and identity politics that there has been no significant change since the heyday of Jim Crow segregation and that American society is steeped in racism. The South, in particular, has undergone huge demographic changes, with an influx of Asians and other nationalities, a shift from the countryside to the city, and a development of industry and growth of the working class.

The reaction to the Charleston church killings is very different than

the popular response in the South to atrocities carried out by segregationist forces half a century ago. When Klansmen bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, killing four black girls—the fourth such incident in that city in less than a month—nobody was prosecuted and there was little open opposition within the white population.

There was a similar response in the South to the 1964 Klan murder in Mississippi of three civil rights workers: Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney.

But despite the rightward lurch of the entire political establishment over the past 40-plus years and its efforts to pollute public consciousness with all forms of social backwardness, xenophobia and militarism, the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s had a lasting impact and racial attitudes in the general population have changed dramatically.

The public response to the Charleston shootings increased the sense within the political establishment of the immense chasm that separates it from the broad mass of the people, and its own isolation. The removal of symbols of slavery and racism is a tactical measure aimed at broadening its support within the population.

At the same time, it is accompanied by renewed efforts to remove the issue of racism from its real social, political and historical context, in order to obscure the fundamental class divisions in society and present racism as something pervasive, ineradicable and deeply embedded in the American psyche.

In his eulogy for slain pastor and South Carolina State Senator Clementa Pinckney, President Obama continued to spearhead this ideological campaign. Having the previous week called racism part of the DNA of Americans, in Charleston on Friday he spoke of it as America’s “original sin.”

He hailed the removal of the Confederate flag as “one step in an honest accounting of America’s history.” Such an accounting is urgently needed and would be most welcome, but if it were serious, it would produce results very different from what Obama wants.

It might start with an explanation of why the political establishment kept noxious symbols of slavery and racism in place for so many decades. The public display of the Confederate flag is not a relic of the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. It was first hoisted above South Carolina’s Capitol in 1962 by Governor Ernest Hollings, a Democrat who later became a US senator, as a demonstration of defiance of Supreme Court rulings against Jim Crow segregation. In Alabama, the display of Confederate flags outside the Capitol in Montgomery dates back to the 1990s.

The political establishment kept the flag flying in the South for definite political reasons. Racism has always been an ideological tool

of the ruling class. Under slavery, it was used to justify a socioeconomic system that brutally exploited people of African descent. Later, with the rise of industrial capitalism and the transformation of the United States into an imperialist power, it was used as a weapon to divide the working class and impede the development of socialist consciousness.

The historical and documentary evidence is voluminous and indisputable, and it would take several volumes to outline the history of racism in relation to the struggles of the American working class.

It can be established, however, that the use of racism as a political weapon to defend capitalism against the threat of working-class rebellion goes back to the first mass upsurge of the American working class, the great railway strike of 1877. A study of the strike in the city where it first broke out before spreading across the country, St. Louis, includes the following passage:

At an early strike meeting an eloquent address by a Black speaker asked whether whites were ready to support demands made by Black workers and received a resounding “We will!” in reply. One of the five early Executive Committee members was Black... Integrated crowds were the rule in St. Louis. Just after the strike, a WPUSA (Workingmen’s Party of the United States of America) leader advocated unity of the races behind labor demands and shortly thereafter S. Louis had one of the few Black sections of the Socialist Labor Party in the United States. (“Not Only the Ruling Classes to Overcome, but Also the So-Called Mob’: Class, Skill and Community in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877,” David Roediger, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter, 1985).

The response of the authorities was to dispatch black troops to attack the strikers.

Henry Ford employed the same tactics in an unsuccessful attempt to break the 1941 United Auto Workers strike for union recognition at his massive Rouge complex in Detroit. Ford imported African-American workers from the South to serve as strikebreakers. Socialist militants within the union had, however, championed the rights of black auto workers and insisted on the need to unite across racial and ethnic lines against the common enemy. This was a major factor in the victory of the strike.

The anticommunist purges and witch-hunts of the post-World War II years were bound up with the defense of Jim Crow segregation in the South and racial discrimination in the North. The government at the national, state and local level identified opposition to segregation with communism, and repeatedly attacked activists in the South who advocated integration as communists and agents of the Soviet Union.

This form of political repression, in its own way, reveals the function of racism as a political weapon of the ruling class against the unification of the working class and its conscious struggle for socialism.

Particularly after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling (*Brown v. Board of Education*) outlawing racially segregated public schools, the anticommunist witch-hunt was expanded in the South, focusing on socialists and leftists who opposed Jim Crow. Show hearings and trials were carried out by Democratic Party officials who controlled the South, with the tacit support of the Republican Eisenhower administration.

According to a 1996 study by Sarah Hart Brown published in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* (“Congressional Anti-Communism and the Segregationist South: From New Orleans to Atlanta, 1954-1958,” Vol. 80, No. 4, Winter 1996):

After the *Brown* decision in 1954, the search for southern subversives intensified. Because the CPUSA (Communist Party USA) had advocated civil rights for black southerners at least since it led the fight for the Scottsboro defendants in the early 1930s, and since many Communists had supported the presidential candidacy of Progressive candidate Henry Wallace, who refused to speak before segregated southern audiences in 1948, identification of integrationists with the Communist Party made sense to many southerners. In addition, most southern politicians found it logical, convincing, and profitable to combine red-baiting with race-baiting...

State and federal grand juries reinstated investigations connecting local Communists to integrationism in Miami and New Orleans just after the *Brown* decision. In addition, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Virginia, Georgia and Arkansas all established or strengthened anti-radical laws and investigatory committees of the legislatures between 1954 and 1958.

The article notes that the US Senate Internal Security Subcommittee held three hearings in the South and the US House Un-American Activities Committee held four between 1954 and 1958. It quotes a leading member of the Louisiana legislature as saying: “Communism and integration are inseparable and...integration is the southern expression of the communist movement.”

Racism and anticommunism were used to defeat unionizing drives after World War II and keep most of the South relatively union-free. The CIO and then the AFL-CIO played a critical role, subordinating the working class to the same Democratic Party that controlled the South and upheld the Jim Crow system.

On this basis, the South presided over the most brutal levels of exploitation and poverty wages, so as to create the most favorable conditions for corporations to amass profits. George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, summed up the underlying agenda, declaring: “Private property and the free enterprise system are under attack by the liberal-socialist-communist crowd. It’s not the business of government to tell a businessman how to run his business.”

Socialists have always fought against racism. But they have done so by exposing its roots in a society grounded in the exploitation of the working class, and on the basis of a revolutionary program to unite all sections of workers against their common capitalist oppressors. This must become the basis for the development of a mass movement in defense of the democratic and social rights of the working class today.



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